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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

- Phedias Christodoulides
- Dalhousie Student Union
- Loyola University of Chicago
- The New School
- New York University
- Northwestern University
- The Platypus Affiliated Society
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
- The University of Chicago Student Government
- The University of Illinois at Chicago

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

we called the blog, our collective, and all our shared ideas. We wrote about politics, but also published short stories, poems, artwork, etc. Even though the collective was Left-leaning ideologically, we didn't limit it to Left-wing writers. That would have been impossible as there are so few of them in Estonia. To make up for this, we encouraged debate and discussion. We would have a writer representing one side of an issue publish their article, and then another who would argue against it. Sometimes there were 50 comments in a row.

JA: Apparently there's a punk scene in Estonia. Was there a crossover between these communities? How did they position themselves relative to the country's Communist history?

HH: I'm really glad you brought this up, because the punk scene in Estonia has its roots in the 80s and 90s, around the time when the Soviet Union fell. There were two types of punks. On the one hand, there were the anarchists, and, on the other, nationalist punks who were for the Estonian national state. Of these two types, the anarchist punks were a huge influence on me and *Disco Elysium*. One influential Estonian anarchist, punk or post-punk band is Vernaskond, which translates to “Brotherhood.” Their approach early on was interesting because they were creating idealist worlds via their lyrics. They were all about building something, but in this poetic dreamland kind of way, they weren't just about tearing everything down. They also published books set in fantastical worlds, and this was a huge influence for coming up with the world of *Elysium* itself.

JA: Speaking of the role imagination plays for the contemporary Left, some observers have read *Disco Elysium* through the lens of the British postmodern critic Mark Fisher, particularly his notions of “hauntology” and “capitalist realism.”

HH: I've read and enjoyed Mark Fisher, but I don't think there was a conscious influence. That overlap might have come from addressing some of the same topics as Fisher, like the material conditions beneath everyday life and mental health. I've been thinking recently about the latter, that it makes a lot of sense that we're all so mentally ill. In fact, it would be incredibly weird if we *weren't* anxious and depressed living in this world. In Estonia, there's a sea of everyday misery. Ally has its own mental health issues by accepting them, realizing that yes, okay, the world sure we aren't completely immobilized from acting to reaction. The question is what to do about it, how to make improves the world.

Usually, when I bring up such topics with other Leftists, I begin to sense a shared feeling of defeat. And this comes up in *Disco Elysium*: that joke about how communism is a failure and is all about failing. This feeling is what we wanted to really touch on. “We had an idea, a dream, and then we failed, and got so utterly defeated. What now?” But no one has an answer. It's just too sad for anyone to think about.

JA: It sounds like it was important for you to engage in dialogue with those who held contrasting political views. Is that a practice you've tried to keep up?

HH: Yes, definitely. It differs depending on the size of the country. In bigger countries like the U.S., it's easier for even encouraged to maintain a tight-knit group of people that you agree with. In Estonia, however, there's only a million people. If I were to only choose friends who shared my political views, my friend group would be incredibly small. So, inevitably, you have to talk to people you don't agree with, and that's a good thing. Debate is what changes things; it causes you to understand where other people are coming from.

MM: You thanked Marx and Engels onstage at the Game Awards in 2019 for your political education. How did you originally come across Marx and Engels?

HH: That was in my teenage years, just when I was deeply gettingting into politics. Although Marx and Engels were probably mentioned in history class, it was likely negative, since generally Estonian history classes paint a bad picture of Marx. So, it was more through read political literature, that led me to them directly. I began to realize the enormous impact Marx and Engels have had — both historically and today — with respect to their understanding of capitalism. Their ideas are so widespread that even people who don't know anything about politics are vaguely familiar with them. And then, years later, I found friends who had similar beliefs, and who recommended literature to each other.

MM: What sort of literature?

HH: I remember reading a lot of Antonio Gramsci. Modern writers too, like Slavoj Žižek, were a huge influence on me. Žižek is interesting in the sense that he's one of the few Left-wing thinkers whose works get published in Estonia. He's broken through the ice, which usually doesn't happen here.

MM: Would you call yourself a Lacanian, like Žižek?

HH: I don't know. When I was younger, I would ask “am I a Marxist? Am I just a socialist? Am I a Lacanian?” Now I just say that I'm a socialist and a Left-wing thinker. Even though the details have changed and I've changed, my Left-wing ideas have stayed the same.

JA: Is it true that you joined a commune when you were about 14?

HH: Yes, I created one with the politically-minded friends I mentioned earlier. Through them, I came to know Kurvitz and Rostov, the creators of *Disco Elysium*. We were idealistic back then and wanted to live this romantic life, having an art collective and a political commune, etc. But in reality, some of us moved in together as flatmates and started a blog. It was like 2010 when blogs were huge. Because it was difficult to break into the institutions of Estonian cultural life, we created a space to share what we had to offer. And that's where the name ZA/UM came from. It was what a socialist has to do with the ideals of socialism.

Leftist roots is because of the creative direction that came from him and Rostov.

The other writers would have to speak for themselves as to how they identify politically. We had a politically diverse writing team. Maybe others would say they're just liberals, but I don't want to speak for them. All the writers were interested in politics.

JA: How about you? Growing up, were politics much of a conversation at the dinner table?

HH: I remember well the moment I discovered I was Left-wing. I was about 11, and I took a political compass test online. I remember doing it diligently. When I didn't understand a question, I researched, so it took me at least a day to go through the test. And then, finally, the answer came: “socialist.” I thought, “Oh my god,” because in Estonia the word socialism has awful connotations. I remember going to my dad at the dinner table and saying, “I took this test online that said that I'm a socialist! What's going on?” My dad is a progressive Right-wing liberal who has a very classical Estonian political view of things, but somehow he has always been open enough to all kinds of politics. He explained to me what the word socialism actually meant. Not just the history of the Soviet Union, but what were considered actual socialist ideals. A big part of why I became so interested in politics later was because my dad was able to be so open and start that sort of discussion with me, even though we would not always agree.

JA: So, in Estonia, the word socialism commonly evokes the Soviet Union?

HH: Yes. If someone calls you a “socialist,” or worse, a “communist,” it's usually an insult. You don't go around calling yourself a socialist. Every single Left-wing person in Estonia first has to think it through: “Is that what I am?” And I understand why. The Soviet Union was a tragedy. I have people in my family who were sent to Siberia. I think every single Estonian has friends I mentioned earlier. Through them, I came to know Kurvitz and Rostov, the creators of *Disco Elysium*. We tend to ignore what happened in the Soviet Union just because it's so painful to recall. However, since we in Estonia have since emerged from this historical tragedy, we should talk about it more. It's a good example of how a movement can be completely derailed by psychopaths. So, it took me years before I started calling myself a socialist, but now I do so in the hopes that it might give new meaning to it. My identification as a socialist has to do with the ideals of socialism.

On May 17, 2024, Platypus New Zealand members Jamie Adam and Michael McClelland interviewed Helen Hindpere, lead writer on the video game *Disco Elysium* (2019). Set in the fantastic realist world of *Elysium*, the role-playing game includes skill checks and dialogue trees that allow the player to determine their political ideology while exploring the aftermath of a deated revolution. *Disco Elysium* was created by ZA/UM, an Estonian studio with socialist art supervising and editing others' work and coming up with ideas as to what that political writing should be.

Michael McClelland: What was your role as a lead writer of *Disco Elysium*?

Helen Hindpere: I was one of the first writers to be hired, so I was basically there from the beginning. Robert Kurvitz was the lead writer for the majority of the game as it was originally released. Only later on did I become a lead writer, and that was for smaller parts of the game, the “political vision quests,” which were later included via DLC. My role as lead writer involved supervising and editing others' work and coming up with ideas as to what that political writing should be.

Jamie Adam: Did you all write together?

HH: Yes, we had a writer's room. Our studio in Estonia was in this run-down building that we were squatting in. It was definitely not fire-safe or safe for business, but that was all we could afford back then. But it was also romantic, as squats often tend to be. We had four or five writers.

MM: What percentage of the writing was yours,

HH: Quite difficult to say who wrote what. I mostly worked on the church area, the area with the ravers, the apartment building, the working-class woman's quest, and everything that happens in the doomed commercial area.

MM: Regarding the political outlook of the game, do you feel comfortable saying that you speak on behalf of the other writers? Do they share your outlook as a Leftist?

HH: I can speak for Kurvitz, the Creative Director of *Disco Elysium*, and Aleksander Rostov, Art Director, because I've been friends with them since I was 15. Robert is more revolutionary than I am, which is amazing and I love that for him. The reason I've been able to say that the game has such strong

Forward-looking return

An interview with *Disco Elysium*

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The legacy of Chinese Trotskyism

An interview with Au Loong Yu

Desmund Hui and Griffith Jones

On July 4, 2024, Platypus Affiliated Society member Desmond Hui and Griffith Jones interviewed Au Loong Yu, a longtime Hong Kong labor-rights activist and author of Hong Kong in Revolt: The Protest Movement and the Future of China (2020).¹ Griffith Jones, formerly of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) and the Nicaragua Information Committee, has worked in Hong Kong and China since 1996.² An edited transcript follows.

Desmund Hui: How did you encounter Chinese Trotskyism? In the 1970s and 80s, why did you think Chinese Trotskyism was still important? What about now? I am especially interested in this comment you made, 10 years ago now in *Thinking Hong Kong*, where you said the term “Trotskyism” belongs to history.³

Griffith Jones: Since 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Tiananmen in 1989 — those are the two you cite to say Trotskyism as a “ism” is dead. But you added that it could have relevance for future political movements. It’s a contradiction.

Au Loong Yu: I actually wrote an article⁴ more than 20 years ago explaining that, as a term used to refer to the particular opposition movement within the Communist Party — afterwards the Left Opposition — then to the founding of their own parties after 1938, this term “the Chinese Trotskyist movement” is politically irrelevant in the 21st century. If you want to describe something living, this term is outdated. History has far superseded the historical context of 1938, when the Trotskyists founded the Fourth International. The Soviet Union, China — the previously considered deformed or degenerated workers’ states — they’ve all disappeared, and been replaced by the restoration of capitalism. The term “Trotskyism” is outdated, but not because the core theory of Trotsky has proven wrong by events since 1989. On the contrary, they proved its validity. But from the point of view of politics, these events also implied that the previous theory about Russia no longer applies, as now the new phase of history has posed new tasks for the Left. It is in this sense that I wrote an article for the website *Pioneer*, which was the name of our group.⁵

We were the direct descendants of the Chinese Trotskyist movement, but like the faction of Ng Chung-yin, the leader of the Revolutionary Marxist League,⁶ Pioneer disappeared less than 10 years after we founded it. We were the only ones left. Of course, the *October Review* still exists,⁷ but there was a reason that we left it in 1976. They have been underground for nearly a century. The Chinese Trotskyists always had a big branch in Hong Kong. But in the 1970s the British government begun to have some political reform; they acknowledged civil liberties, and that’s why our generation — through our fight against restrictions and censorship to have a more liberal regime (more *de facto* than *de jure*) — came out in the open as Trotskyists at that time. But the old comrades wanted to remain underground. I understood their concern, but that didn’t make sense for us as open activists. We walked away, and the *October Review* was still updating its website until about four years ago.

GJ: In 79, with the establishment of the Sino-British Friendship Agreement, there was some cracking down by the Hong Kong government on the Left. We were talking about the 70s being a time of relative freedom — was that just a blip or could you feel the difference going from the 70s into the 80s with the Friendship and handover negotiations?

ALY: There were crackdowns even in the most “liberal” era of the British government. The early 1970s were the time when the colonial government started some reforms, but in 79 it wanted to give a present to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). We held a demonstration on April 5 to commemorate the April 5, 1976 Tiananmen incident three years earlier, but they wouldn’t grant us a license for assembly. We still went ahead, and they jailed three of our comrades — as a gift, because in 79 it was also the moment when the British and Chinese governments resumed their so-called “friendship.” The liberalization in the final 30 years of British rule over Hong Kong continued until the British government left.

I mentioned the *October Review*. Because they have always been underground and they were old already, they were practically absent from all open social movements — you can’t find them. Practically we were the only small Trotskyist group to remain active throughout those years. But we’re also getting old. In the last 10 years we practically stopped functioning as a political collective. We have all kinds of health problems, etc., though I still write a lot.

As a functioning movement, Chinese Trotskyism has come to an end. Within the young generation, there’s been a big swing to the Right in the past 10 years; we’ve had no luck at all in recruiting anyone.

However, the legacy of the Chinese Trotskyists is important for the re-founding of the Left in the future, particularly with regard to China. In the Chinese situation, under a totalitarian regime, many young people have been miseducated to such an extent that they don’t feel like they need to learn from history, even those who are skeptical of the regime’s propaganda.

After 2020, during the White Paper movement,⁸ I came into contact with young Chinese students in Britain, and even some in America and Japan. I support them; I don’t lecture them, but I can tell they are mostly liberals. But what’s more, even as liberals they don’t know much about history, even if they have been studying in the UK for several years — not to mention Left history. The problem is that after brainwashing for so many years, there is no continuity in the Chinese dissident movement. Even if their dissent is political, it is about the immediate future: there is no historical depth to their analysis; everything is messy.

For instance, the Second Chinese Revolution, the Northern Expedition, why the Kuomintang (KMT) split with the CCP — it all becomes something like, “Chiang Kaishek betrayed the revolution!” This is just silly. Chiang Kaishek was never on our side! He didn’t betray

anyone! The rest of the story you know well.⁹ What the young generation learns about history is messy.

DH: How did you encounter this historical continuity with Chinese Trotskyism in your youth?

ALY: That historical continuity was exactly what was important to us, to my generation. I’m glad that we walked away from the *October Review* — we were young; by that time I was barely 20 — but we didn’t stop learning from them. There were a few old Trotskyists, one of them named Xiang Qing, about whom I wrote after he died¹⁰ — that followed us to the founding of our new organization. We learned a lot from the old Trotskyists, even if we had to say goodbye to most of them because they were underground: you can’t do anything when you’re underground.

I was 17 in 1974, but I’ve been politically conscious since I was 14, because I joined the Baodiao movement.¹¹ I read about the May 4 movement,¹² the New Culture movement.¹³ It was silly; I didn’t know how to respond to the silliness. The silliness I am referring to is that in Taiwan they badmouth Lu Xun, the great Left writer, and they exaggerate the role of Hu Shih as the leader of the New Culture movement. Then, on the other hand, the CCP only wants to mention Lu Xun. I mean, come on! Lu Xun was not politically active; he was a literary novelist. His role was important, but he was not the chief inspiration for so many people. Because both sides don’t want to talk about Chen Duxiu!¹⁴

Neither the colonial government, the CCP, nor the KMT wanted young people to know the truth about Chen Duxiu, who was the actual spiritual leader of the New Culture movement, who later founded the CCP, and who was then expelled under Stalin’s order for his independent thinking. Both Lu Xun and Hu Shi, despite being great thinkers and writers on their own, were no match for Chen. However, when I was a secondary student I knew close to nothing about Chen.

It’s funny, when I was still in high school my Chinese teachers didn’t want to talk about Chen Duxiu. Only one eccentric Chinese teacher who taught Chinese literature — the only time he talked about Chen Duxiu was when he said, “do you know what Chen Duxiu means? Du means *youdu* (venomous), Xiu means *mengxiu* (a beast)!” So, a toxic animal. That was the first time I ever heard the name Chen Duxiu. But thanks to this eccentric teacher I did read about Chen several years later.

I had questions but didn’t know whom to ask. I started reading everything, but I didn’t have a clear picture in my head. I’m glad I finally found the journal of the young Trotskyist organization. That is how I came into contact with Chinese Trotskyism. Their wealth of knowledge immediately struck me, and I realized I had to learn from them. It was important that there was some continuity, but there is no such continuity nowadays. Young people’s memory doesn’t go back more than 10 years. Beyond 10 years ago, what they know is either Chinese government propaganda, or, if they went overseas, it is the mainstream liberals’ interpretation of everything — most of them turn into liberals immediately. Additionally, most of them, especially in London, are quite well-off — in America some of the Chinese students can get a sponsorship for their study much more easily than in Britain today — most of them are not interested in this type of thing. The next topic I want to write about is this difficulty of the Chinese democratic or socialist movement.

DH: What attracted you to Chinese Trotskyism specifically? Most Hong Kong Leftists — radical students — would have become Maoists. The people who became Trotskyists were few and far between. Why were you attracted to this historical continuity and not Maoism?

ALY: I had a classmate at the time who became Maoist. It wasn’t as popular as you might be led to believe. Most people were still apolitical. In the universities there were 1,000 to 2,000 people who were at least a bit political and would want to read stuff like that. Within that cohort the mainstream was Maoist. In Hong Kong then there were just four colleges and two big universities. In 1973 or 74 all colleges and student unions became Maoist, except that of Hong Kong University.

But for me, and most of us who joined the Trotskyist movement, we aspired to democracy, a rudimentary aspiration. We didn’t like the personality cult around Mao. In my family, my mother’s side had some connection with the KMT — they were KMT military officers — and on my father’s side, some of our family’s branches were in the CCP. Since my teens I was political, but I had no interest in Maoism precisely because of my resentment against authoritarianism and the personality cult — and also, practically, the lack of culture.

Daily I would pass by a Maoist bookshop. Even in 1971 or 73, whenever you went into this bookshop, everything was red, the wall was red, and there were a lot of Little Red Books. It wasn’t really a bookshop because there were so few books; it was all propaganda. I read a lot of classical Chinese novels — for instance *Shuihuzhuan* (*Water Margin*)¹⁵ — and I liked them so much. But by then you couldn’t even buy *Water Margin* from a Chinese bookshop! You had to be there to understand why, even if it temporarily had some kind of influence, Maoism wouldn’t last in Hong Kong, because it’s just a lie. So no, I wasn’t interested in Maoism at all; it was just an echo of the past.

GJ: In the 1970s China was dirt poor and underdeveloped in so many ways as a result of the Cultural Revolution, but there is also its socioeconomic history. The 70s were in the wake of the 67 riots,¹⁶ and there was a mass refugee population leaving China and coming to Hong Kong in the 50s and 60s; hundreds of thousands if not a million first-generation Chinese fled the mainland. Under those circumstances, it is hard to imagine that Maoism was attractive to anyone.

ALY: Maoism wasn’t attractive in the 70s, especially after 71. Hong Kong was always the doorstep of

China. The benefit of British control of the island was that we didn’t have to go through the terrible things from the Great Leap Forward, the famine, the so-called Cultural Revolution, etc. The second benefit was that we knew what was going on; we knew what happened in the Great Leap Forward, the famine, and the huge wave fleeing from southern China. I was small then, but there was documentation of it, and my parents talked about it. It was a man-made disaster. Many people knew that the CCP and Chairman Mao were directly responsible. In mainland China, the control was so complete; it was always a totalitarian regime. Everyone had a personal file, and any political remark you made would be recorded. But in Hong Kong we knew what was going on, for those who wanted to know. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to Hong Kong in 1961 and 62 because of the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward. One couldn’t say, “the CCP has inherited a poor country from the KMT, but the regime serves the people.” But Chairman Mao — who did he serve with his campaign, the Great Leap Forward? It didn’t make sense.

I still remember: as a boy I had to go to school everyday, and everyday I would pass by a post office, at which I saw queues of people lining up to ship basic necessities, from noodles to even a towel, to their families in mainland China. When I asked my dad why so many people, including my father, were shipping such things so often, he said, “*mou zyu zik, mo dak sik*” (“[Because of] Chairman Mao, [there is] nothing to eat.”), a popular saying back then.

That was why in 1967 when Maoists and their sympathizers started a so-called general strike in Hong Kong — actually only the most faithful CCP members joined them — it was silly. What was the reason to strike, to struggle against the British colonial government? Are we going to kick out the British colonial government? They never dared to say that was in their agenda, although in their slogans they said, “down with the British colonial government!” But were they going to take it down? If they could, they would, because it’s just a group of islands — they could take it back right away. But this was never the intention. It was the Gang of Four that wanted to complete their dream of having the whole of China, including Hong Kong, to have a Cultural Revolution, that’s all. But what was their political agenda? Were they going to kick out the colonial government? No, they wouldn’t. From the beginning it was a lie, it was cheating the people to support the CCP by doing silly things for nothing.

So most people did not find Maoism appealing. Of course, at the time the CCP still had thousands of loyal followers in the working class. Some of my family — not direct relations — were still loyal to the CCP, so I was familiar with it. Maoist sympathizers did hate the colonial government — I hated it too; it was our general and justified mood at the time. But the problem was, after 1971 everything began to change, because after the death of Lin Biao there was a big outcry within the CCP trade union. Some of the old cadres angrily challenged their leaders, “Lin Biao was chosen by Chairman Mao as his own successor! How could it turn out he was a traitor? And you did the same before with Liu Shaoqi: you handpicked him as your successor, and then you killed him off! For what?” Any sensible person would no longer believe in the CCP after that; after that most of the cadres resigned because they were just common workers — they were demoralized and left the movement. Maoism lost its attraction long ago.

If the students at the time had an increased attraction to Maoism, it was chiefly because of the Baodiao movement and the accession of China to the United Nations. These core Maoist students were actually clandestine, hiding their real identities. The CCP ran six schools, and they brought up their own Maoist students in this way. Many of the young CCP sympathizers, if they were able to go to university, would become the core of those Maoist students; they were experienced and would easily capture the student unions. They did have a following at that time, but it had to do with Hong Kong young people who were beginning to question many things, when suddenly China’s accession to the United Nations gave them a national pride, which had been stirred up since the Baodiao movement. These young people — they had no life experience, they never worked before, they believed anything people told them. But it was short-lived; by 77 it practically disappeared.

DH: How did Chinese Trotskyists in the 70s diagnose the CCP or the Maoist regime? Mao’s rule is complex, and there are stages to it, but the Chinese Trotskyists had many different responses to the regime that emerged from the 1949 Revolution. For instance, Wang Fanxi originally called it a bureaucratic collectivist state, which he later changed. Then we have Peng Shuzhi who went to the U.S., and who called the Chinese state a deformed workers’ state. Finally, Zheng Chaolin, who stayed behind in China, always called it a state-capitalist state. Were these debates ongoing during the 70s? How did Chinese Trotskyists deal with the phenomenon of the 1949 Revolution?

ALY: After Mao Zedong’s victory in 1949 the majority and the minority at first had different appreciations about the regime. While Zheng Chaolin endorsed the theory of state capitalism, Wang Fanxi temporarily endorsed bureaucratic collectivism. As for the majority, they were wavering, not certain about what to call the Revolution, but after a few years they would endorse the position that it was also a deformed workers’ state. However, eventually Wang Fanxi would also endorse this position and drop his own narrative about the Chinese regime; in appearance they were in alignment with each other.

I will come back to this analysis of the Maoist regime in 1949; “was it correct?,” etc. the differences between the majority and the minority were not as big as both sides thought. You could say the importance of this debate is exaggerated. But I want to stress that despite all these categorical or temporal differences, there is one important contribution of the Chinese Trotskyists which has not been recognized or has been underrated by those outside, which is their analysis of the Cultural Revolution.

You know well that by the end of the 60s there was a huge international youth movement everywhere and Maoism was quite strong. There were also European Maoists who genuinely believed everything the Chinese

leader said. But if you read the writings of three people — Peng Shuzhi, Wang Fanxi, and Xiang Qing — on the Cultural Revolution, they are basically the same. They all saw the Cultural Revolution as a fake revolution; it had nothing to do with culture, nothing to do with the proletariat; it was not a revolution in the Marxist sense.

It’s not entirely the same, but the open street violence against innocent people by the so-called Red Guards — especially in the later stages of the Cultural Revolution they were quite diversified, it depends on the local context — those who committed the most horrible crimes against humanity were no different from fascists, Nazis. They were committing crimes when they literally killed writers, musicians, any well-known intellectual, innocent person, or common worker. The Cultural Revolution was a huge movement, but one may say the official campaign was reactionary. All three main leaders of Chinese Trotskyism at that time, those who still enjoyed a bit of freedom outside of China — Zheng Chaolin was in prison, so he couldn’t write — all three of them left behind their writings about the Cultural Revolution. Their texts are a good record, and, now, looking back after more than 50 years, they were farsighted.

DH: I have read Wang Fanxi’s “On the Cultural Revolution” (1967),¹⁷ in which he implies that the Cultural Revolution could have been a revolutionary opportunity because it represented a discontent against the bureaucracy in China. So while it’s true that Wang Fanxi wasn’t a fan of the Cultural Revolution, he did see some potential in it, or generally thought it could have been an opportunity for a Trotskyist intervention. A slogan he uses in that essay is, “to turn Mao’s fake revolution into a real revolution.”

ALY: There was a rationale to argue for that. After the height of the madness in 67, there were signs that some radical young people who were more well-read and thoughtful were beginning to question Mao. That was an important, though somewhat symbolic, turning point, because nobody knew how widespread this new awakening was. At the time there was a well-known big-character poster¹⁸ that condemned Chairman Mao for betraying them, betraying the revolution; they wanted something real, etc. Therefore, the reason Mao had to force those young Red Guards, practically exile them, to rural areas — *shangshan, xi下乡* (up to the mountains and down to the countryside)¹⁹ — was that Mao knew he was losing control, and he needed to bring the army to impose martial law against the Red Guards.

But for the Trotskyists, it was impossible to make use of this situation, because in 52, during the Winter Solstice,²⁰ Chairman Mao had already arrested 700–800 Trotskyists and their supporters — all in a single night. The CCP is always in a pre-emptive strike mode — that’s the horrible part.

On characterizing the Chinese regime, there were a lot of labels for it: deformed workers’ state, state capitalist, bureaucratic collectivist, etc. In retrospect, using the concept of state capitalism to describe Mao’s China is problematic; it’s illogical. If it were state capitalist under Mao, and also state capitalist under Deng Xiaoping, why would we have such a rupture in so many things? There was a continuity in the reign of the CCP; the regime was still there, but the problem is in its foundations, laid down by the 1949 revolution: they have been abruptly changed by Deng Xiaoping and his successors. What came previously was all different from Deng’s China. How can you use the concept of state capitalism to explain the rise of China in the past 30 years? You can’t.

The formula of a deformed workers’ state captures two contradictory facets of the CCP regime. On the one hand, the regime supposedly gave land to the peasants, the state-owned enterprises had guarantees of job security, etc. This is the progressive side of the revolution. On the other hand, there is a deep regressive side; it is bureaucratically deformed, etc. However, in retrospect this term wasn’t good enough in debating the Chinese regime, simply because, despite its grasp of two contradictory sides, from the beginning there was a hard core that determined the direction of the CCP henceforth. Everyone knows that in 1949 it was a peasant army that liberated the cities, and this regime became increasingly unaccountable to the people to the extent that it quickly became absolutely impossible to change the CCP’s policy in a peaceful way. The opportunity was already lost early on, especially after 57, the so-called Anti-Rightist Campaign,²¹ which literally killed off those progressive forces within the CCP.

You could say it began earlier, in 53, when the CCP dropped its original program of so-called New Democracy, the dropping of which at the time both the majority and minority of the Trotskyist movement approved. The New Democracy was a pipe dream, assuming that a socialist revolution could come to terms with the bourgeoisie, that the so-called national bourgeoisie would happily collaborate with a socialist regime, that they wouldn’t maximize their profits, that they would share profits with the state and the workers, etc. We know the rest of the story, that no real socialist transformation followed. There were the people’s communes or the Great Leap Forward, etc.; it was the top leaders’ mad dream of state building, of an increasingly despotic and exploitative bureaucratic class. China’s semi-colonial past did make China’s quest for enough self-defense legitimate, but Mao and his successors have far exceeded what is legitimate. They overdo things about state building because they are the ruling class. They are not a class in relation to a particular mode of production, but a political class that enriches itself through its monopoly on state power.

Because of its particularities, this revolution lacked a real democratic mobilization of the workers and peasants in the taking and governing of power. It was a professional army, and the whole state was militarized to such a point that you could call the Chinese party-state a big military camp. When Mao abandoned New Democracy, he was also suppressing his own opponents within the Party. There were comrades, the top leadership, who were disturbed by Mao suddenly saying, “tomorrow we are going to have a general line of socialism! We are going to confiscate the bourgeoisie’s property! We are going to advance to socialism, to a collective economy! We are going to have communes in the rural areas!” This became a disaster.

From here we can say that between 1941 and 43 Mao was establishing his own personal dictatorship. This

was not that clear when the PRC was founded. Mao was only the main leader, but only later did we know that the 1942 Rectification Campaign, when they killed or jailed writers and others, was the prelude to his agenda of creating his personal dictatorship over the Party. In 1943 he made the Politburo pass a resolution literally naming him as the only one to make the final decision for anything important. This was only known after Mao's death (1976). We have to see this as a turning point of the CCP: from then on it was Mao's personal dictatorship. The problem was now there was a leader with no scientific training and who was never well-known for being democratic: some of his former close friends and comrades who were still able to talk about him before he came to power mention his ruthlessness and dictatorial tendencies. His personal dictatorship changed everything. Whatever the policies written in the CCP program, it was meaningless. The constitution? Meaningless. They don't even allow the judicial system to make any quotations of the constitution; the constitution itself was banned from Chinese governance, from the beginning up until today.

In the early 1950s no one was aware that Mao's personal dictatorship would go to such an extreme. Just like the Nazi regime, before 1933 no one knew except the Left, but they couldn't imagine the extremism of Nazism. In certain ways you can see this in the early 1950s in China; even when the Trotskyists knew they were going to be oppressed, they didn't see a bright future for themselves in this regime, they still didn't fully grasp the extent of its reactionary nature. But in retrospect the concept a deformed workers' state is insufficient. It is comparatively better than the state-capitalist theory, but it wasn't enough to grasp the deeply reactionary side of this regime.

GJ: It's problematic to even use the term "workers' state" in the context of a regime that in 1952 outlawed the free association of workers and banned all unions except their pet front group.

ALY: Those who defend the term may reply to you like this: "you talk about democracy, but one should remember that in the time of great revolution, fighting against your common enemy — the White Army, Chiang Kaishek — these are historic battles, in which you can't afford to have too much democracy." That was relatively true, though it still depends on the situation. Especially in a civil war there isn't much space for democracy. I agree that this is one of the criteria but it is still not the decisive one. The decisive one was by 1957 when it should have been clear: we don't have democracy because we are still being contained by the American empire and sanctioned by the United Nations, but it could at least be favorable to the workers, right? But there were spontaneous strike waves in 1957, and they were dealt with through repression. It was not accidental that soon after the 57 crackdown on potential dissidence, Chairman Mao wanted to implement his version of the communist dream. Practically it was the most extreme version of the militarization of labor; it was nothing about socialism or the benefit of the people. There are no people in the eyes of Chairman Mao; all he wants is to become the second Qin Shihuang!²² Xi Jinping's dream or Mao Zedong's dream, they're the same: to build a strong, nationalist state machinery. It was meant to be grand, powerful, capable of challenging the U.S. — *chaoying, ganmei*, to surpass Britain and catch up with the U.S, to be number one! It was state-building, perfection of the state, nothing about socialism. In 57 that was clear enough, you could see how far the personal dictatorship could go, or at least by the Great Leap Forward. The term "workers' state" is insufficient.

But things are complicated and messy in the world. You may say, objectively speaking in international politics, the fact that a poor country rose up against imperialism at all, even with a horrible regime, will change the balance between the imperialist countries and poorer countries. You might say that this could benefit a country or a region. In terms of international politics, this still may play an occasionally progressive role. But fundamentally it is not progressive.

GJ: Given the fact that only 10 years later they were aligning with the U.S. against the Soviet Union —

ALY: That is the benefit of personal dictatorship! They press a button and then everything changes! Whatever their promise, don't be fooled by it.

I've been thinking about this for a long time. I haven't had time to write about it because I have been occupied by the current situation, but we need to have this debate: how far was Trotsky correct about this "degenerated workers' state" theory? Trotsky was right — because he died early, but also because some of the debate about Trotsky's formula is too bookish, too static, losing something of Trotsky's analysis. He was always dynamic; his analysis always captured the living forces. We have to understand the concept of a degenerated workers' state from a dynamic point of view. In *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), he was explicit about this, asking, "why hasn't Stalin restored private property yet?" He said it was because Stalin was afraid of the working class, who still had the memory of the October Revolution — this is an important remark. But it also means that this was conditional, that the Soviet Union remaining a degenerated workers' state depended on the conditions of something that could live but also die. Memory could die.

DH: The memory of the working class?

ALY: Yes. After World War II, the partition of the world, and the Cold War, as late as the late 1950s, it was clear that that is what happened to the generation of 1917. When a Bolshevik was in his 20s in 1917, by 1957 he would already be over 60. They would all be retiring, irrelevant. Even if they had kept the memory, to whom would they pass it? It wouldn't be good to talk about it too much to their sons and daughters, given the consequences. We have to relativize Trotsky's characterization within the context of generations, the study of which is becoming more important — in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, etc. The generations of revolutionary Russia died long ago and not even a degenerated workers' state existed. This is my argument.

DH: In Platypus we read a letter that Trotsky wrote to James P. Cannon of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) in 1939, where Trotsky basically says, "you

can call the Soviet Union whatever you want, but you should explain what that adds to our political strategy, what that means for our politics."²³

I want to return to your encounter with Chinese Trotskyists in the 70s in Hong Kong. Given your descriptions of the degeneration of the Chinese regime in the eyes of Chinese Trotskyists, did they have hope or a strategy for revolution in China? What was their perspective politically while they operated in Hong Kong?

ALY: I had an interview with *Initium Media* in 2015 where I talked about that,²⁴ because it is important, even to the so-called weekly democratic struggle. For those places that don't even have a liberal democracy, it justifies the fight for liberal democracy. We shouldn't be absent from this struggle for democratic rights. We know how we differ from the liberals, because we believe only the working people or the lower-middle class could be the potential bearers of genuinely democratic or socialist struggle. There are always Right-wing sections of the working class; this shouldn't surprise us; that was the case even in the 1930s. Today we are witnessing the rise of the Right, and even some of the working people subscribe to it, and we shouldn't focus on that section of the working class. There is always a larger section of potential bearers of socialist struggle within the working class, and we have to rely on them. That is what distinguished us from the liberals, who were naturally indifferent to and afraid of the working class.

The Chinese Trotskyists knew this well. The successors to the legacy of Trotsky knew how to combine the immediate struggle for democracy, basic rights, to the perspective of a genuine socialist transformation. That was why Wang Fanxi argued for Taiwan's self-determination in the 1970s in one of his pamphlets.²⁵ There are still many people in Taiwan who don't know what the Left means — for them the Left means the Communist Party. The word "Left" is stigmatized to the point that it means totalitarian regimes and their supporters. We had some collaboration with young Taiwanese Leftists 20 years ago; we showed them what Wang Fanxi had written, that it was not the case. The reason the Trotskyists had been imprisoned for decades, wiped out totally, was because the CCP is the fake Left. Wang Fanxi always argued for basic self-determination for Taiwan.

In the 70s we already proposed the idea of self-determination for Hong Kong as well, because the historic trajectory of the Hong Kong people was so different from that of mainland China since 1949. This gives us the historic right to determine ourselves. In our eyes, in my generation, there were always two Chinese governments competing for claims over China, but they didn't give a damn about the Hong Kong people. Not the Communist Party, not the KMT, they don't give a damn about our plight. After all these historic experiences, shouldn't we have the right to ask, "you guys are representing China; well, sorry, I don't know why I should fall into your jurisdiction at all, because you have never given a damn about us, so we have the right to say goodbye." We may not say goodbye in the end — we are not calling directly for Hong Kong independence, just the right to self-determination.

GJ: Virtually the first request of the CCP after joining the UN was to have Hong Kong removed from the list of colonial territories that were to be granted the right to self-determination.

ALY: Yeah, but what they really cared about was the list. They have the freedom to do anything against us without the UN asking a single question. That was their agenda.

In my interview with *Initium Media* I mentioned a pamphlet we published in 1983,²⁶ a year before the conclusion of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. In the pamphlet I remind the readers that we Chinese Trotskyists have been respectful of the people's right. We don't respect the right of the state, especially when the state is divorced from the people's will. We don't disconnect from the real struggle on the ground. At least we are one of the positive, even if not influential, parts of the historic struggle for the past nearly 100 years. Especially now that the Chinese government wants to erase the collective memories of the Hong Kong people, it's important to reclaim this history.

DH: Why, despite the efforts of the Chinese Trotskyists, did they remain such a minority, a small group not only on the Left but also the broader population? Were the Chinese Trotskyists successful in their attempts to raise consciousness? Were there problems in the movement that prevented it from becoming a mass movement?

ALY: At the risk of oversimplification, I'd say my predecessors — Chen Duxiu, Wang Fanxi, Zheng Chaolin, Peng Shuzhi — all tried their best, but their fate was sealed in some sense. In 1952 they exterminated all of us in China. Nobody even knew about it, because it wasn't on the news — that was how secretive the CCP was in its repression of the Trotskyists. We practically vanished from history, and if it was ever brought up it was slander and frameups. Of course, one may say, "before 1949 you had a chance to develop." But the situation was just too difficult.

DH: The KMT on the one hand and the CCP on the other.

ALY: Just look at Zheng Chaolin! He was in prison under the KMT for more than six years, then he was in the CCP's prison for another 27 years, which means a third of his life was in prison — luckily he lived long, otherwise it would have been even more tragic. A similar story applies to most of our Trotskyist comrades.

The old comrades in Hong Kong had been underground for so many years because once you were discovered by the colonial government they would imprison you, and several months later, they'd give you a choice: you go to mainland China, Taiwan, or Macau. Many of our influential comrades were kicked out of Hong Kong because of this. Of course, underground you can do work, but we were doubly unfortunate, because Hong Kong became an immigrant city in the 1950s. Hundreds of thousands arrived in Hong Kong who would be happy to get a job. They wouldn't give a damn about your idealistic socialism after what they had seen in China, not to mention that they had to work 14 hours a day. It was too difficult.

After I joined the Trotskyist movement I decided to work in factories, to get recruits. I was so naïve, but I did learn the lesson: it's impossible. That's why in 1979 I went against the "turn to industry."²⁷

GJ: When Desmond asked you about the failure for the Trotskyist movement in China to take off, you cited the lightning purge in 1952. At the risk of being even more simplistic, wasn't 1927 ultimately the real death knell of socialist revolution in China, and with it the fate of the Trotskyists?

ALY: This assumption would have to be based on several premises. Firstly, that the CCP could not grow its peasant army beyond a critical mass level, which means that the Party wouldn't be able to keep a stable base in rural areas. If that were the case, even if it grew eventually to a bigger force, it wouldn't have been that big, whereas in 1949 they already had three million soldiers. If they had been much smaller — a lot of soldiers, but not that big — the situation would be different, and the KMT would not have so easily collapsed. This might have allowed some space for the Trotskyists' attempt to build a base among the urban working class. This scenario might have been possible but not that probable, as the militant labor movement hadn't been able to recover from its defeat in 1927.

The second possibility was that after 1949, for whatever reason, those opponents of Mao in the Party would have been able to reassert collective leadership over Mao Zedong, and to restrict his authority. Then maybe — it depends on whom — things wouldn't have become so extreme; there would be some kind of formality of legal justice. Many leaders of the Chinese Trotskyists didn't even have formal charges against them — they were just arrested and put in a dark jail cell. Their crimes? No formal prosecution: you are prosecuted but with no formal procedures.

GJ: Like Kafka.

ALY: If Chairman Mao died in 1951, perhaps it would be a bit different. Or even if, due to the Barbarossa tragedy in 1941, Stalin, Khrushchev, or Molotov reasserted some collective control, maybe it would have been different; that would change the balance between the Soviet Union and China. In that case, China may have had a chance to loosen itself from the grip of Stalin. But these possibilities were improbable.

DH: What if there were an international socialist revolution? Trotsky did say that Stalinism grew from socialism in one country. Trotsky's perspective was that an international socialist revolution could save whatever was progressive about the Soviet Union.

ALY: In retrospect, we could question if the East looked to the West or if the West looked to the East.

DH: Both looked nowhere.

ALY: So it's not easy.

GJ: As someone who participated in virtually every protest there, I appreciate your book *Hong Kong in Revolt* (2020). You observe at one point that with the collapse of Occupy Central,²⁸ the movement suffered a blow and went into a quiescence. Yet five years later the popular movement came back with a vengeance.

I walk around the streets of Wan Chai²⁹ everyday, and as I pass people in the street I often wonder, were they in the protests? Because one-in-four people that I encounter probably were. There were two million people in the street; Hong Kong's population isn't even eight million. What prospect do you see for the future of democratic mass resistance to repression, which so far falls just short of direct rule? What hope do you see for the future?

DH: What contributions do you think Chinese Trotskyism could have for the future? What is the legacy of the history of Chinese Trotskyism for the present?

ALY: Hong Kong has been the last outpost for the Chinese Trotskyists since 1952. The annihilation of Hong Kong autonomy also means that their safe house is finished. Hong Kong is too small to fight the CCP. This repression is destroying most of the social movement — this kind of repression hasn't been experienced in four decades, and the current generation doesn't know what to do about it. They can't do much underground work, because most of them have been openly active. Only the young generation, who are freshly graduated or come out to work after high school, could do some kind of underground work, but the problem is they don't know how to do it; no one taught them. There's a deep demoralization now. You mentioned how the Hong Kong people recharged again in just five years after their defeat in 2014. Surely we should not have this kind of linear thinking now, especially in the case of China and Hong Kong.

Only if mainland China experiences a liberalization and a mass, sustainable upsurge of the protest movement, would Hong Kong have a chance to fight back. This requires the Hong Kong people to learn from the 2019 revolt. If not, all efforts will be finished in a single blow. But this consideration of the prospect of Hong Kong hasn't even begun.

As for the second question, the legacy is that the Trotskyists have provided elements of a good roadmap for the Chinese democratic struggle. They provided a reference point on many big issues, for instance, in characterizing the CCP regime. One must look beyond the nametag of a "degenerated workers' state" and grasp what they have written about the core essence of the regime, i.e., its relationship to the people, and more importantly to historical precedents, to the grand glory of Imperial China. No matter what the Chinese Trotskyists called Mao's regime, don't forget that their conclusion was to call for a political revolution against the regime. This was a regime which was beyond repair. Mao's successors might have been, until now, less extreme in pursuing their great state-building agenda, but their totalitarian nature is the same as Mao's. The people will not be free unless they successfully rebel against it. In this sense when Hong Kong people called for a "revolution of our time" in 2019, they were also echoing what the Chinese Trotskyists have been doing since 1949.

The CCP — Mao is the best illustration — have inherited for good or for bad more from Imperial China than from Marxism. Since 1949, Marxism has just been a PR exercise, nothing more. We have to look at the origins, its connections with

the premodern political culture of China, and its relationship to the peasants.

Actually, one confusion brought about by Maoism is its glorification of the peasant class. Yes, we have to have a peasant-worker alliance in order to implement democratic transformation and eventually socialist transformation, but the problem is that as Marxists we know well the peasants as a sole proprietor, as a petty bourgeoisie — they have no interest in your socialism. The peasants are not a unified class; it is heterogenous. Only the poor peasants can come along, and even they pose a problem for socialist transformation because of their lack of culture, lack of education, and their lack of a depth of perspective across the class and the country. This is not their fault, but we have to differentiate Maoism and Marxism.

For a poor country like China in 1949, in some ways it's true that China wasn't ripe for socialism, when you only have a working class of four million within a sea of 800 million. We have to look at the CCP's relationship with the peasants and the working class.

This also means the Chinese Trotskyists' idea of permanent revolution. Of course, it was borrowed from Trotsky, but because they were in China they knew what this actually meant when more than 90% of your population was peasant; this created a huge challenge for the workers' movement. Extreme industrialization under the CCP has benefitted the working class in one respect, and only indirectly: it modernized and urbanized China to the extent that it has led to the growth of a working class so immense that its number nowadays accounts for much more than half of China's workforce and one fifth of the world's. In this situation, there is no *economic necessity* for the nowadays working class to stop from directly fighting for a socialist program (as was the case back in 1925–27), if only they had the freedom to organize along with the awareness of their historic role. In this sense, contemporary Chinese history has superseded the theory of permanent revolution. Unfortunately, the more than 70 years of totalitarian rule has dulled the working class's awareness of their own strengths to the point that the legacy of their predecessors has been lost. Because of this, the theory of permanent revolution, its argument for the importance of democratic demands and the dialectical relationship between democratic and socialist demands, is still relevant for today's activists. There will be a moment when the working class may be able to act again, as the White Paper movement has shown.

This is not to mention the Chinese Trotskyists' idea of self-determination for the minorities and the peripheries of China — Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc. — and their commitment to democratic transformation, which is fundamentally a socialist transformation. No socialism is worth the name if there is little democracy. The Chinese Trotskyist commitment to genuine democracy is their legacy, and it lives on. **IP**

¹ (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

² See Desmond Hui, "'Worse than the 80s': An interview with Griffith Jones," *Platypus Review* 161 (November 2023), <https://platypus1917.org/2023/11/01/worse-than-the-80s-an-interview-with-griffith-jones/>.

³ Liu Lining and Au Loong Yu, "出版與思想探索: 社會主義青年社-新苗/先驅," *Thinking Hong Kong* 7 (July 2015), <https://www.thinkinghk.org/about1-c1y4x>.

⁴ See Liu Yufan, "大題小做談托洛茨基主義," *Worker Democracy* (April 8, 2018), <https://workerdemo-hk.com/2018/04/08/大題小做談托洛茨基主義>.

⁵ In Chinese, 先驅社. The article was written in 2002 for a summer class and is unpublished.

⁶ A Trotskyist organization that existed in Hong Kong from 1975 to the mid-80s, although it never officially announced its dissolution. Members of the group later formed the April 5 Action Group, which was a loose group with no explicit connection to socialism.

⁷ The *October Review* is the newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist Party of China, which was founded by the Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi in 1948.

⁸ Anti-government protests in 2022 that demanded an end to China's zero-COVID policy and criticized government censorship.

⁹ Au recommends Harold Isaacs's account *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (1938).

¹⁰ Au Loong Yu, "Living with Political Clarity: A Tribute to Xiang Qing," International Viewpoint (September 4, 2022), <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7800>. In Chinese: "區龍宇: 做一個清醒的人 — 紀念向青," *Linking Vision* (July 26, 2022), <https://www.linking.vision/archives/13429>.

¹¹ The "Defend the Diaoyu Islands" (Baodiao) movement was a social movement in the 1970s that sought to defend Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu / Senkaku / Tiaoyutai islands against Japanese claims.

¹² An anti-imperialist and democratic movement begun by students in Beijing on May 4, 1919, in protest of the Treaty of Versailles's decision for Japan to retain territories in Shandong that previously belonged to Germany.

¹³ An anti-traditionalist movement in the 1910s and 20s that attempted to modernize and overturn China's traditional culture.

¹⁴ One of the founders of the CCP and later a leader of the Chinese Trotskyists.

¹⁵ A classic Chinese novel about rebel outlaws.

¹⁶ Anti-government riots in Hong Kong in 1967 that were influenced by the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁷ In *Mao Zedong Thought*, ed. and trans. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

¹⁸ Handwritten posters placed in public places to express political views. They were common in China during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁹ The Down to the Countryside movement was a policy, started in the mid-1950s and ending in 78, to send Chinese youths to work in rural areas. The movement intensified especially during the Cultural Revolution.

²⁰ The Winter Solstice is traditionally celebrated in China with the Dongzhi Festival.

²¹ The 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign reversed a prior political liberalization in China introduced by the Hundred Flowers Campaign and involved the mass prosecution of alleged "Rightists."

JA: One of Harry’s key qualities as a character is his alcohol-inflicted amnesia.⁷ Do you think the Left is amnesiac in some way?

HH: With Harry, we just applied a very standard trope in building his character. We didn’t make any conscious connection between it and the Left, but that’s an interesting interpretation.

MM: It seems that by way of *Disco Elysium*’s various decision trees and skill checks, the player occupies not only the headspace of Harry, but the Left in general. The player’s reckoning with the failure of the Left is embedded into the game via its mechanics.

HH: That’s an interesting interpretation that I’ve never heard before. I absolutely love it! You can really play around with this idea, like when the player makes Harry become Right-wing. It’s like how in some Left-wing circles, after Bernie Sanders’ defeat, some people realized they could not achieve change immediately, becoming disappointed and drifting to the Right.

We wanted players to arrive at political conclusions through playing, not by picking whatever ideology they preferred at the game’s beginning. It isn’t one of those games where you say at the outset, “I’m a socialist,” or, “I’m a centrist.” It’s something you discover through your actions and your dialogue choices. I’ve heard a lot of audience feedback that people are surprised to find themselves leaning in certain political directions via their in-game choices. The same mechanic is also how we engaged players who were not interested in politics. Through playing, they realized that there actually are political choices and opinions woven into our everyday dialogues, and that politics isn’t just something that happens in the media and among politicians, but is what influences our everyday life.

JA: Let’s talk about some aspects of the plot. You said earlier that you wrote the “doomed commercial area” section of the game, which is an abandoned urban zone where the player is tasked with getting to the bottom of its economic “curse.” There, the player encounters a vague sense of a liminally-perceived problem or crisis. What were you exploring?

HH: There’s a character there called Plaisance who has an esoteric bookshop.⁸ One thing we were trying to explore with her was how people tend to offer a range of different explanations for a problem that is often obvious, just in order to avoid facing the reality of the latter. The truth of the matter is that under capitalism we don’t have a lot of control over our jobs, our income, or our means of survival. But psychologically, we have to find ways of dealing with such impasses, and a lot of people turn to esoteric explanations. They find imaginary means of explaining their situation, if just to give themselves a sense of control. And I’m not saying this to shame people; it’s a completely normal reaction. So, with Plaisance, we wanted to explore this mystification, this attempt to explain what could be going wrong in her doomed commercial district. That is, if you look at the material conditions of the town, the question is, why *should* business thrive there? It’s a town that doesn’t have any outsiders going in, people are very poor, and it doesn’t have much purchasing power around it. But the people there try to explain the problem away, falling into superstition.

We also wanted to make sure that there is never just one answer, as is the case in real life. There are always competing, different reasons for what is going on, and for us, as writers, we wanted to come up with as many possible answers as we could. It makes things more realistic.

JA: Plaisance is also interested in economics.

HH: Yes, a lot of modern mystical thinking relates to economics. Manifesting is a good example, in that supposedly if you do certain rituals like thinking only good thoughts about money, the money will come. If you look at successful, rich people, you’ll soon discover that they cling to so many old rituals, whether that of simply repeating the mantra of hard work, or others that make even less sense rationally. But in reality, success is random. You’re either born into a rich family, or you win the lottery, so to speak, and somehow the algorithm notices you and you become successful. So, we use rituals, if just to calm our psyche. Plaisance is trying to do that; she’s trying to figure out what to do to be successful without having the real answer. She’s just doing what keeps her psychology intact and working.

MM: Wilhelm Reich wrote about mysticism in the context of working-class supporters of the Nazis, concluding that “Marxist politics had not included in its practice the character structure of the masses and the social significance of mysticism.”⁹

HH: Yes, there’s been a lot of talk recently about the mystical or esoteric character of extreme Right-wing views. There’s a pipeline.

JA: The Right-wing “vision quest” in the game is particularly interesting in that regard, where the player can engage with the fascistic character Measurehead and the idea of fascist time travel.¹⁰ Do you see the far Right as a desire to turn back the clock?

HH: That’s one way of seeing it. A lot of far-Right thought consists of an idealized slant, a perception that things were better in the past. That’s how many on the Right explain it themselves, but no political side is unified. That’s the difficult thing about writing about politics. There are different fractures that are always changing. Those who want to return to some amazing, imagined past are just one part of the far Right, and there are others who don’t think about it.

JA: I want to ask a broader question about your views on art. In the church section you worked on, a vision of the future is brought about through the medium of a new “anodic” dance music. There are also the mariners who use songs to cross the Pale.¹¹ Do you share this sense of hopefulness, and how do you see it relating to art?

HH: Art is incredibly helpful in keeping us going, so that the totality of capitalism doesn’t break us down. But I’m pessimistic about art’s ability to transform material conditions or bring about political change. It can perhaps help change people’s views, maybe help them become more curious. I’ve heard from the *Disco Elysium* audience that there are people who weren’t that political before playing the game, but whom the game prompted to start learning more.

There’s another interesting topic, one I’ve noticed in post-Soviet countries and that I’ve heard is similar in China: authoritarian governments cause young people to lose interest in politics, which implies the dangerous outcome in which one says, “politics is for someone else; I can change so little that I might as well become disinterested.” This came out of the post-Soviet years, and it’s still affecting Estonian youth.

Art can create an interest in politics, but in order to make change we have to rely on other things. Art is only the first step. I’m pessimistic in the sense that we need to start actually organizing in order to make change.

MM: You’re saying that your pessimism lies in the present, and your optimism lies in paths forward?

HH: Yes.

JA: Paralleling your experience with taking the online political compass test when you were 11.

HH: Yes, exactly.

MM: The game tends to use the word “communism” as opposed to softer-sounding terms like “socialism” or “Leftism.” How have players responded in Estonia?

HH: I know that at least some part of our audience, especially from post-Soviet countries, are in denial about my political views. I’ve seen comments that suggest that me shouting out Marx and Engels at the Game Awards was done ironically.

MM: There was, in a since-deleted post on the ZA/UM Instagram, a picture of the developers’ studio with a portrait of Stalin on the wall.¹² Was that ironic or sincere?

HH: Estonia is a post-Soviet country, so there’s simply a lot of old Communist things hanging around everywhere. I’m not pro-Stalin, I can tell you that. I completely condemn Stalin. It’s a tragedy that Stalinism happened. A psychopath entirely took over our ideals of what socialism was meant to be.

Shouting out Marx and Engels at the Game Awards was definitely not ironic. I did it not to spread propaganda, but to inform people about where I come from, how I see the world, so they can see my biases, my ideological leanings. I’m not free of ideology. I just try to be conscious of it.

JA: The game deals with ideology in an interesting way. It’s framed from a default liberal perspective, quite literally in the sense that the camera hovers above the player, its isometric point of view identical with that of the Moralist International¹³ gunships in the sky that hover as an invisible threat of violence. Then there’s the character of Kim Kitsuragi, who, with his deadpan pragmatism, acts as your liberal conscience, your moralist Jiminy Cricket.

HH: Yes, the camera perspective is a good thing to point out. Exactly as you said, this all-encompassing liberal media view is the lens through which we see reality in the West. So, it was conscious on our part as developers to make the camera perspective reflect that, offering a commentary on how so much of the media is liberal, but presents itself as neutral. And then once you become aware of different political ideologies, you start to see that there is actually no purely neutral observer point of view. But also we on the development team do happen to like isometric games. We almost always needed to have some in-game reason for every single thing that happened in *Disco Elysium*, so we just needed to conceptualize and make sense of it: “why are we seeing everything in that perspective?”

JA: The story intermeshes political and personal loss via Harry reliving his traumatic break-up with a character who, broadly speaking, personifies liberalism.¹⁴ Do you regard society as being in a break-up with liberalism?

HH: In the 90s, once the Soviet Union fell, there was this “end of history” moment in the popular imagination for about ten years. But then 9/11 happened, and it was like, “okay, history continues.” As the 21st century has increasingly taken its shape, we’ve begun to realize that liberalism isn’t as neutral as it proclaims itself to be. Many players have given feedback that at first they picked the moralist, centrist, liberal options, only to be surprised at the outcomes of those choices, which are not as simply good, nonpolitical, or neutral as they expect. One thinks, “I’m not taking political sides at all; I’m not into any kinds of extremes,” but this view itself is part of the political discourse. Liberalism, too, is a choice, not just the default setting.

MM: Do you know this Russian joke? “Everything the Party told us about communism was a lie. Unfortunately, everything they told us about capitalism was true.”

HH: Yes, I know it. Exactly. For my parents’ generation, their school classes were all about what communism is, so they have this different understanding of what true Left-wing politics could achieve in the modern day. To them it all just seems like a thing of the past. But it’s changing in other Western countries where there isn’t that same past.

MM: How do your parents see liberalism?

HH: My parents’ generation sees liberalism as the answer, and for a similar reason a lot of Estonia is trying to be the good boy of the European Union: “we do things correctly here.” As if Estonia is asking, “how European, how liberal can we be?” There are also some more nationalist, far-Right parts of my parents’ generation, and, surprisingly, of my generation too. I was shocked when I realized how the far-Right is growing among young people.

MM: You earlier mentioned the example of disaffection after the failure of Bernie Sanders, who, of course, ran for presidency twice with the Democrats and eventually endorsed both Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. After that experience, some groups on the Left, especially younger people, are seeing “true” Leftism as a matter of being more radical — less hypocritical — than the liberals. Was there a social democratic moment in Estonia, the equivalent of a Sanders movement, Momentum, SYRIZA, or Podemos?

HH: No. There is a social democrat party that always gets into Parliament, but they’re not even among the top three most popular parties here.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the party that has occasionally stood up for the working class is a centrist party that never uses the words “Left-wing.”¹⁶ Again, this is because of history. It takes a long time for people to understand that such words can mean

something other than state repression and all those horrible things. So I understand where it comes from.

This is maybe where the pessimism about socialism in *Disco Elysium* comes through. For a Left-wing politician in Estonia, fighting successfully for the rights of working-class people means not mentioning that you’re Left-wing. You have to be clever; you have to hide it in order to get things done.

JA: This reminds me of Evrart Claire, the union boss in the shipping container.¹⁷ How do you regard unions with respect to the Left?

HH: I’m all for unions. Claire was more of a commentary on the fact that there can be people in Left-wing organizations who sometimes have questionable morals, or who do things merely for the sake of doing them. But it was not a commentary on unions per se. I believe in unions, especially in the context of Western societies. Even in Estonia, where people are not known for being social and where the whole working-together-in-groups thing tends not to work out, unions have proven to be surprisingly useful and effective given our history. They have a role.

Unions are important in the video game industry, which is a good example of what capitalism can do in an industry that is so unregulated and so new. We desperately need unions to start regulating it. Even the gaming audience is slowly realizing that they’re not going to get amazing games without the people who make the games having great conditions and a sense of security. I recently read a statistic that said that an average video-game employee spends five years in the industry before burning out and leaving.

JA: Some unions can and have become corrupted, though, and others have become a mere appendage of the state. Do you see any tension within movements with noble aims and yet which require necessary evils?

HH: All movements or organizations can get corrupted in a sense. People have diverging interests. Human beings are so diverse that things can go south in any given cause or organizational context. But, because Leftism has such pronounced ideals, it becomes more noticeable when things go wrong. Take public political discourse where if a Right-wing politician is corrupt or steals something, people say, “at least he was honest about it.” But in Left organizations, a similar issue wouldn’t relate to the cause itself so much as being an organizational problem. So that’s what we tried to explore by making the union boss a polarizing character. It’s not just “union equals good.”

JA: Do you think unions improve capitalism or just ameliorate it?

HH: That’s a difficult question. There are some people who say that, for example, social democrats are extending the lifespan of capitalism because they’re making it a little bit more tolerable, and what we need is actually revolution. We do need a revolution too; I agree with that. At the same time, I think our lives are short and we have to do as much as possible in the present to make things even a bit better for workers.

MM: You mentioned earlier the “ideals” of socialism as opposed to certain grim realities surrounding its past. In the Platypus primary Marxist reading group, we read a text by Leszek Kołakowski, a communist from the former Polish People’s Republic in the Soviet Union, who wrote that “the Left gives forth utopias,” by which he meant not unrealizable utopias in the colloquial sense, but definite visions for transforming the bounds of the possible:

Utopia is the striving for changes which “realistically” cannot be brought about by immediate action, which lie beyond the foreseeable future and defy planning. Still, utopia is a tool of action upon reality and of planning social activity. . . . That is why the Left cannot be defined by saying it will always, in every case, support every demand of the working class, or that it is always on the side of the majority. The Left must define itself on the level of ideas, conceding that in many instances it will find itself in the minority. . . . the Left must be defined in intellectual, and not class, terms.¹⁸

HH: That’s very interesting. To the first part of the quote, I was like, “Yeah” — the entire utopia thing has been a huge draw for me with respect to Leftism. I’m a person who needs to envision a better world. I’m not able to look at what we have and just say that this is enough. I need to have a sense of vision. But then when you got to the conclusion of the quote, I didn’t agree with it. I very strongly disagree that Leftism is merely an intellectual exercise.

MM: Kołakowski isn’t talking about “the intellectuals” versus “the workers.” Rather, he’s much more broadly addressing the way we think about things: that whether one is a professor or a factory worker, the concept one applies to “the Left” matters. In other words, by conceiving of the Left in intellectual, not strictly practical terms, by holding it as a fixed idea in our heads, we challenge ourselves to regard the Left as a category unto itself, not merely a competing faction with the Right. By upholding this ideal — that of transforming, not preserving the world — the Left cannot accommodate to “practical necessity.” cannot become the Right. Which leads us to a point we’ve been circling around, that of ideas and art. Why do you see video games as an adequate means to express Left ideas?

HH: Ideas, even fantastical ones, are important. Capitalism, on the other hand, causes people to stop being able to envision alternatives. Fiction functions to keep other worlds alive. Ursula le Guin, for instance, did it brilliantly in her writing. You can’t just take one part of Leftism and say, “let’s only focus on that.” Rather, they work in this beautiful symbiosis where you have ideals on the one hand and the immediate actions we can take on the other. The ideas are the star you follow, the marker you set up for where to go. I hope that creativity can help us expand what is possible.

MM: *Disco Elysium* is all about the failure of Communism and the Left generally. What do you make of the game’s success? On the one hand, it’s great for you personally that the game has sold well and earned awards, but on the other, it indicates that audiences can sense that there is a sustained crisis beneath the Left. To put it another way, if the Left was doing wonderfully, perhaps your game wouldn’t be so successful.

HH: The success of the game is interesting in itself because it leads us to examine the material conditions of success, the question of who earns money from the game. The entire video-game industry, and creative industries generally, have this problem where often the intellectual property rights are owned by capitalist entities who want to control everything that happens. A lot of people have pointed out that what happened to our studio after the game’s popularity was almost ironic.¹⁹ Where did the money go? Who profited from the success of this Leftist game? Well, spoiler alert, not Leftists.

It’s a textbook example of how you can have all these Leftist ideas, but then you also have the material conditions around them. Is it possible to make art in capitalism without making money for capitalists? Probably not. Maybe crowdfunding is the answer, but it’s difficult.

The success of the game is a very complicated topic for me. It’s good because of the audience and what it meant for people. But it did not turn out the way I thought it would turn out. I was a little naïve.

JA: You talked earlier about the Estonian Left having difficulty reconciling itself with its past. The Mazovian reading group in the communist vision quest make a tower made out of matchboxes, which looks like a famous 1919 design for a Soviet building that was to represent the dialectical spiral of history.²⁰ Do you think history “spirals”?

MM: Or is it an eternal recurrence?

HH: I would say it’s a spiral, not a circle. We are returning to the same themes but always with a new twist.

MM: Spiraling upwards?

HH: Exactly. I’ve realized during this interview that I’m actually an optimistic person. I always used to think that I was pessimistic.

JA: How does this relate to your writing?

HH: All of my writing is inspired by history. I sometimes say that I don’t make things up, I just take them from history and then put them in another context so people pay them more attention. That’s how the entire world of Elysium was created. We just took things out of their contexts, freeing them of the conscious notions and subconscious associations attached to them by applying different names and aesthetics. The hope was that people could see them in a new light, and that is what I usually say I do. But I’m not just writing for myself; I’m writing to communicate ideas. These come from history, about which Kurvitz and I read a lot.

JA: Communicating with history, putting the past and present in communication with one another?

HH: Yes. Every decision about which way to go forward as a society is so heavily influenced by how we see and interpret the past. When conflicts break out between states, for instance, a question people ask is, “what is the history behind these events?” How do we understand and reconceptualize them?

JA: In the game there’s the motif of the Return (Le Retour), which seems to evoke the beautiful potential of a vague and unspecified event lying in an emancipatory future.²¹ It seems to be both something new and also, as the name suggests, a return to something old.

HH: It’s interesting that you picked that. I think the Return is one of the most important concepts in the game, even though we don’t explore it much other than via snippets here and there. We could get psychological or Lacanian here, like the idea of returning to your mother’s womb.

MM: Or Freudian: the return of the repressed?

HH: Yes. It’s what signifies revolution in the world of Elysium. It’s the same idea I talked about earlier. Revolution is usually imagined in the future, but here, it’s as if it’s something you have already felt. It suggests why we’re so drawn to notions of revolution. Everyone has felt it in their life at some point, so it’s a return to that feeling you already know. It’s a bit of a poetic, mystical explanation, but the Return signifies revolution and the aspiration that one day it will happen after all.

MM: It’s like art. In the realm of aesthetic feeling, we appreciate that which we already sense but cannot yet find words for. And yet Adorno talks about the artistic act as the creation of that which we do not yet know.

HH: Definitely. Art can surprise you, like when you later look at an artwork you yourself created and say, “so *that’s* what that is.” It’s like discovering a part of yourself. In the context of society, I agree that it’s like showing something that might still be unknown to the collective consciousness. That’s what you’re striving to do.

JA: And yet it contains some of what we were addressing previously regarding Measurehead’s fascistic time travel, how it’s a forward-looking return.

HH: Yes, I noticed that connection as well when I was talking, but I had never put that together. On the one hand there’s Measurehead’s return to better times, and on the other there’s the “return” forward into a utopian world that we have never known and has never existed, but feels like home. The former is merely an imagined past that we see signs of and yet have never experienced. To go there would be to go backwards. [P

¹ This interview assumes readers have not played *Disco Elysium*. For more about the game and its elements, see <https://discoelysium.fandom.com/wiki/Disco_Elysium_Wiki>.

² Downloadable content.

³ The Game Awards were held at the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles on December 12, 2019. See “*Disco Elysium* Wins the Fresh Indie Game Award Presented by Reggie Fils-Aimé,” <https://youtu.be/D0z4QcRZu_g>.

[Endnotes 4–5 available online]

⁶ “Yes! Abject failure. Total, irreversible defeat on all fronts! Absolutely vanquished, beaten, curb-stomped and pissed on — until “you” came along! “You” will reverse the fortune of the workers of the world.” For the full quote, see <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Quotes/DiscoElysium>.

[Endnotes 7–21 available online]